The Career of Colonel Pluck: Folk Drama and Popular Protest in Early Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia

FOLK DRAMA, often neglected as quaint festivity, found vigorous and challenging uses as a mode of political communication in early nineteenth-century Philadelphia. In the best recorded and most controversial of these dramas, the city's workingmen recycled older traditions of mock election, charivari, and costumed burlesque to attack Pennsylvania's unpopular militia system. One famous militia burlesquer, Colonel John Pluck, stood for decades as the prime symbol of inversion, laughter, and defiance.[1]

In the career of Colonel Pluck in particular and militia burlesques in general, we can trace part of the history of folk drama in the city. This history is a facet of the transformation of older plebeian cultural forms, both rural and urban, in the nineteenth century. Here are keys to the culture and ideology of antebellum workers. Far from meaningless foolery, costumed parades and burlesque protests expressed the shared views of the men who performed them. To untangle and trace their

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[1] The term "folk drama" in folklore scholarship refers to a collection of dramatic genres and practices studied by folklorists, mainly among European peoples Folk dramas have been defined by their community locus and focus, and by their non-commercial production, often but not exclusively by male age cohorts Broadly, these dramatic traditions are calendrical and festive, and in some of their forms they include rhymes or plays Folk dramatic customs also comprise processing, begging and dancing, mimings and maskings Two major themes of European folk dramas have been discerned folk "plays" on themes of life, death and regeneration, and the use of processional performances to constitute, outline and reconstruct communal bonds and boundaries, often at critical times of the year

Although most scholarship on folklore has remained focused on the integrative, cohesion-promoting uses of traditional dramas, folk dramas have often been turned by the rural poor to contest, protest, and the aggressive defense of community Such was the case, with the charivari or rough music in England E P Thompson, "'Rough Music' *Le Charivari Anglais*," *Annales Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 27 (1972), 285-315, Violet Alford provides a detailed folkloristic description of the English charivari in "Rough Music," *Folk-lore* 70 (1959), 505-18 Arguments about the political uses of folk drama are extended by Norman Simms in "Ned Ludd's Mummers Play," *Folk-lore* 89 (1978), 166-78

meanings, however, we need to relate militia burlesques to the militia system and to the larger context of politics and society in the city.

The way these folk dramas were viewed by different audiences gives clues to the relationship between culture and class, performance and power in the industrializing city. Masking and parodies in the streets were often seen by representatives of the propertied—the party press, reformers, and local governmental officials—as wild and irrational, part of the problem of working-class behavior in public. Although militia burlesques did take place in disorderly, festive streets, behind officials' concern for order lay uneasiness over the uses of public communication, and that foremost medium, the street. The plebeian traditions of street drama posed the problem of the relation between the political and the theatrical. When working-class political protest entered the streets, even in fantastic garb, those with stakes in the established order became uneasy.

Tracing the origins of urban folk dramas is frustrating; evidence is scattered and documentation of eighteenth-century American popular culture was almost always random or accidental. Burlesques, parodies, and maskings were probably known in Philadelphia and its surrounding countryside from the earliest period of European settlement. After 1800 the migrants from the hinterland and immigrants from overseas brought a variety of folk dramatic traditions. These older folk traditions interacted with the commercial culture of the stage and press to create a vibrant, local vernacular culture.

The best known eighteenth-century uses of street theatre were the stylized and ritualized actions of revolutionary crowds and mobs. Philadelphians and other colonial urbanites relied on dramatized actions to voice disaffection, defend popular prerogatives, or threaten justice to wrong-doers. As Alfred Young has shown, colonial traditions of public political ritual were drawn from several sources. Some techniques of crowd justice—for example, hangings in effigy—borrowed from the official theatrical exercises of state power: public whippings, humiliations, and executions. Others, like tarring and feathering, were extrapolated from occupational custom. In this case, Anglo-American sailors recast a maritime punishment into a publicly visible mode of

justice, applying it to landlubbers.[2] As the Revolution began in Philadelphia, the populace employed techniques of folk justice against Tories, sympathizers, engrossers, and forestallers. Hangings in effigy, burnings of "Stamp Men," mock funerals for the loss of liberty, and ritualized public humiliations of crown officers were part of local revolutionary mobilization.[3]

In many eighteenth-century cases, local elites acquiesced, assented to, or collaborated in the production of street dramas. Many crowd actions drew economic and political leaders and the "lower orders" together in revolt. A vivid account of the 1780 procession in "honor" of Benedict Arnold shows the cross-class nature of these street dramas. The traitor's effigy, borne along on a cart,

> was dressed in regimentals, had two faces, emblematic of his traitorous conduct, a mask in his left hand and a letter in his right from Beelzebub. . . . At the back of the figure of the general was the figure of the Devil shaking a purse of money in the General's left ear, and in his right hand a pitchfork ready to drive him into hell as the reward due for the many crimes which his thirst for gold had made him commit.

Arnold's mannikin was surrounded by didactic symbols, explaining his crime and declaring his treachery "held up to public view, for the exposure of his infamy . . . his effigy hanged (for want of his body) as a traitor to his native country and as a Betrayer of the laws of honour." The procession was led by "several gentlemen mourted on horseback," a "line of Continental officers," "sundry gentleman in the line," but also a "Guard of the City Infantry," drawn from among the "lower orders" and "attended by a numerous concourse of people, who after expressing

[2] Alfred F. Young, "Pope's Day, Tarring and Feathering and Cornet Joyce, Jun., From Ritual to Rebellion in Boston, 1745-1775," paper presented to the Anglo-American Conference on Comparative Labor History, Rutgers University, April 26-28, 1973, *idem*, "English Plebeian Culture and Eighteenth-Century American Radicalism," in Margaret Jacobs and James Jacobs, eds., *The Origins of Anglo-American Radicalism*, (New York, 1983), 185-212, Dirk Hoerder, "Boston Leaders and Boston Crowds, 1765-1776," in Alfred F Young, ed , *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb, 1976), 233-71, Edward Countryman, "'Out of the Bounds of the Law'. Northern Land Rioters in the Eighteenth Century," in Young, *The American Revolution*, 37-69.

[3] Steven J. Rosswurm, "Arms, Culture and Class: The Philadelphia Militia and the 'Lower Orders' in the American Revolution," Ph.D. diss. (Northern Illinois University, 1977), 84-106.

their abhorrence of the Treason and the Traitor, committed him to the flames."[4]

The crowd could also act autonomously and aim their dramatic techniques—and their violence—at local elites and national policies. Rioting broke out in the city in 1779 over the "loyalist" sympathies of local leaders; later, some among the "lower orders" used riots and dramas to demonstrate support for the French Revolution, antagonism to the Jay Treaty, and post-war tax policies.[5]

The political uses of impersonation, ridicule, and direct action by the crowd continued in the nineteenth century, but these uses were shaped by shifts in social relations. On one hand, elite support for direct and dramatic action against illegitimate authority waned as local property owners consolidated their own power. At the same time, reformers attacked, modified, and ended the public theatrical exercise of state authority in punishments and executions. Floggings stopped, the stocks disappeared, and public hangings took place inside prison walls.[6]

Even as the official display of power receded from public view, political and economic leaders reorganized public ceremonial roles for themselves. Through patriotic and military ceremony, affluent young men cast themselves in the roles of defenders of the peace and preservers of historical memory.[7] At the same time, those with economic and political power withdrew from participation in plebeian cultural traditions. Despite Quaker suppression of popular culture, affluent Philadelphians had probably understood, if they did not patronize, folk dramatic practices (for example, such Christmas customs as shooting in the New Year).[8] By the early decades of the nineteenth century, edu-

[4] *Pennsylvania Packet* (Philadelphia), September 30, 1780 Another use of ritual shaming by the crowd occurred on the July Fourth after General Howe's evacuation of the city a procession bore a prostitute dressed in a high British headdress through the streets, cheering and banging drums Ridicule of the British turned on the social and sexual 'filth' of the woman Henry D Biddle, ed , *Extracts from the Journal of Elizabeth Drinker, from 1759-1807, A D* (Philadelphia, 1889), 107

[5] Alfred F Young, "Afterword," in *The American Revolution,* 449-61, 458, Thomas Slaughter, "Crowds and Mobs, Riots and Brawls Public Disorder in the Era of the Constitution," paper presented to the Conference on the Creation of the American Constitution, sponsored by the Philadelphia Center for Early American Studies, October 20, 1984

[6] Michael Meranze, "The Penitential Ideal in Late Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* CVIII (October, 1984), 419-450

[7] Susan G Davis, "Theatre of the Streets Parades and Ceremonies in Philadelphia, 1800-1850," Ph D diss (University of Pennsylvania, 1983), 64-116

[8] Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1978), 207-286 cf Peter Buckley, "'A Privileged Place' New York Theatre Riots, 1817-1849," paper presented at the Annual Meetings of the Organization of American Historians, April 1, 1980, Philadelphia

cated and propertied classes viewed plebeian dramas and customs as rude and quaint at best; more seriously, they called them barbarous and irrational, an evidence of the degeneration of the lower classes. Samuel Breck, recalling a late eighteenth-century Christmas mummers' play in Boston, commented on this change in attitude. The mummers burst from the nighttime street into the rich household to perform their antic play and beg a treat in honor of the season. What, Breck wondered, "should we say to such intruders now? Our manners would not brook such usage a moment."[9]

While elites withdrew their tolerance for the old customs, the new, commercial theatre and popular press reinvigorated folk dramas. Media entrepreneurs conversely drew on the older genres and street culture to build popularity for their novel products.[10] Burlesque, the humorous or mocking exaggeration of traits, burgeoned in Philadelphia's popular theater and street literature, beginning at least as early as John Durang's imitations of Pennsylvania German dialect and manners in his traveling theatricals.[11] In the early decades of the century caricatures and stereotypes, as well as stock characters, slipped lightly between the stage and street and back again, so that urban working-class life—the most famous example is Mose, the Bowery B'Hoy—was imaged on stages in every Northeastern city. Blackface minstrel characters, Shakespearean staples, and the theater circuit's favored stereotypes all made appearances in street parades.[12]

Parades parodying militia musters opposed the militia system and laws as well as the forced participation in the public militia companies. A widely felt hostility toward the militia laws and officers from the

[9] H E. Scudder, ed , *The Recollections of Samuel Breck* (Philadelphia, 1877), quoted in Williams Wells Newell, "Christmas Maskings in Boston," *Journal of American Folklore* 9 (1896), 178

[10] Raymond Williams, "The press and popular culture an historical perspective," in George Boyce, James Curran and Pauline Wingate, eds , *Newspaper history. from the 17th century to the present day* (London, 1978) 41-50, Dan Schiller, *Objectivity and the News The Penny Press and the Rise of Commercial Journalism* (Philadelphia, 1980), Peter Buckley, "An Essay on New York Publics," paper presented to the Social Science Research Council, New York City Working Group, November 18, 1983

[11] Elizabeth C Keiffer, "John Durang, the First Native American Dancer," *Pennsylvania Dutchman,* 6 (1954), 26-38, Alfred Shoemaker, "Stoffle Rilbp's Epistle," *Pennsylvania Dutchman,* 6 (1954), 39.

[12] Richard M. Dorson, "Mose The Far Famed and World Reknowned," *American Literature,* 15 (1943), 288-300, Francis Hodge, *Yankee Theatre. The Image of America on Stage* (Austin, 1964).

1820s through the 1840s found expression in political platforms, literature, the theatre, and humor—as well as in street parades. This antagonism had its roots in the history and structure of Pennsylvania's militia duties. The militia had always been a two-tiered organizaton reflecting social divisions and distinctions. Privately organized troops of propertied men had been raised in the mid-eighteenth century. During the Revolution, the radical Committees of Association organized Philadelphia's workers and poor men into public militia companies. After the war, class division persisted in the public-private pattern of military organization.[13] The universal service requirement mandated in federal law in 1792 asserted that defense duty was the right of all eligible men (whites, between eighteen and forty-five years) but Congress left the implementation of local preparedness to the states. While the federal government provided ordnance and supplies, the state governments retained the power to raise, train and equip men.[14]

In Pennsylvania, perhaps especially in Philadelphia, militia duty weighed unevenly on rich and poor. The state required all eligible men to attend two annual training days and used roll-keeping and fines to enforce participation. Every man had to supply his own uniform and weapon or risk a fine for improper appearance. Workingmen found militia duty an onerous, expensive burden, because muster days deprived them of two or more days of labor annually, because uniforms and shoulder weapons were expensive, and because fines often exceeded a dollar a day. Laborers, mechanics and artisans viewed militia duties as an unjust burden.[15]

Prosperous artisans, merchants, businessmen, and professionals found easy alternatives to militia duty. With more profitable uses for their time, most men of property paid fines or bought exemptions. The pleasure of belonging to an exclusive, self-regulating, and manly volunteer militia troop beckoned to others. Although no one has written a social history of the militias in nineteenth-century Philadelphia, it is clear from newspaper accounts and troop histories that volunteer companies served as pivotal social and political organizations. Volunteer

[13] Rosswurm, "The Philadelphia Militia," 112-173.

[14] Paul T Smith, "Militia of the United States from 1846-1860," *Indiana Magazine of History* 15 (1919), 21-47, John K Mahon, *History of the Militia and National Guard* (New York, 1983), 46-96

[15] Mahon, *Militia and National Guard,* 46-96, John J Holmes, "The Decline of the Pennsylvania Militia, 1815-1870," *Western Pennsylvania Magazine of History* 57 (1974), 199-217

militias functioned as the building blocks of local political parties, as networks of influence, opinion, and conviviality. Men who drilled together also ate, drank, did business, and courted together, and a military title was an important prerequisite for election to public office. For men who wished to participate in military activities, the volunteer militia company provided a wide range of personal and social advantages.[16]

The distance between the private and public militia companies grew in the early nineteenth-century after the Pennsylvania legislature made a series of decisions to support the volunteers at the expense of the public companies. These decisions were a piecemeal series of militia "reforms," responses to the embarassments of the War of 1812, the increasing apathy and resistance among public companies, and most important, to the political influence of the private companies' officers who were themselves political leaders. In 1818, the Legislature exempted from further service any man who had belonged to a volunteer company for seven years. This time limitation was a powerful device to encourage volunteer membership. At the same time, lawmakers refused to recognize grievances against public training days and fines. Throughout the early 1820s and 1830s, the Legislature rejected petitions to abolish or modify general musters; it stiffened fines and attempted to ensure their collection. In 1824, in the face of increasing demoralization in the public companies, the state restructured the system's funding. Federal monies and revenues from fines were now channeled into the volunteers' coffers.[17] With these new incentives, a plethora of new private companies sprang up, some of them existing only on paper. Yet because volunteer company membership was exclusive and expensive, the militia law had been made no more fair. In fact, reform furthered inequality and spawned continued controversy.

Within this context of antagonism and conflict, working-class members of public militia companies, frustrated with trying to change the militia law through petitions, turned to familiar techniques of folk drama to broadcast their critique of the militia system and its proponents, the officers. In mock elections and burlesque street parades, the opponents ridiculed the "malicious system," trying to end an unjust legal institution, as they put in, by laughing it out of existence.

[16] Davis, "Parades and Ceremonies," 64-116, Philip S Klein, *Pennsylvania Politics, 1817-1832: A Game Without Rules* (Philadelphia, 1940), 13-14, 32-34

[17] Holmes, "Pennsylvania Militia "

The best recorded burlesque of a militia muster took place in 1825, in the Northern Liberties. A poor and working-class district clustered around boatyards and docks, adjoining small workrooms, the Northern Liberties had a long history of resistance to unjust authority. Many of the crowd actions against loyalists had drawn personnel from this neighborhood; in the 1820s and 1830s, the Adjutant General's militia fines collectors knew that a venture into the Liberties meant risking a pelting with rotten eggs, at the very least.[18]

One day in May, 1825, at the election of militia officers, the Liberties' obscure foot regiment, the 84th, nominated and elected as its Colonel, John Pluck, "a poor, ignorant, stupid fellow," an ostler at a tavern stable.[19] Although the division officers execrated the 84th's choice and invalidated the first polling, a second vote confirmed Pluck by a vast majority.[20]

John Pluck's election was a joke, a slap at the division officers and high state officials. The *Saturday Evening Post* announced:

> Pluck has been elected, Governor Schultze not withstanding, and there can be no question but that the gentleman will answer all honest and honorable anticipations. . . . True, it is a little out of his ordinary sphere, but what of that?[21]

A colonelcy was indeed above Pluck's station. As a laborer who cleaned stalls for a living, the new colonel ranked among the lowest of the low, especially compared to the other officers, who were usually lawyers, merchants, and bankers. A manual laborer, Pluck was often filthy, and since he owned no tools and part of his pay was in lodging, his work placed him in the condition of a servant or retainer. He could not even call himself an independent working man. To elect him regimental colonel inverted all protocol, bringing the smell of the stables into the officers' tents. The *Post* explicated the pranksters' point:

> 'Honor and Shame from no condition rise: Act well your part and there the honor lies.'. . . If this be the case, Colonel Pluck is to all intents and purposes a right honorable man . . . he acts as well his part whether it is in cleaning out a stable or rubbing down a pony.[22]

[18] *Niles' Weekly Register* (Baltimore) April 4, 1835, 76, *Niles' Weekly Register*, July 20, 1833, 344, and September 14, 1833, 47

[19] *Niles' Weekly Register*, May 14, 1825, 176

[20] *Saturday Evening Post* (Philadelphia) May 7, 1825

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] *Ibid.*

The ostler's comrades elected him to show that a servant was a better man with a clearer sense of honor than titled and careering officers, appointed adjutants, and elected officials who time and again thwarted attempts at militia reform. The men of the 84th picked Pluck for more than his occupation and his brave last name. He was severely deformed and, according to several press reports, may have been mentally deficient. "Napoleon is low in stature—Pluck is lower still!" crowed a reporter. "I estimate him at five feet bare."[23] Extremely bowlegged, hunchbacked, and bent over, Pluck with his bulging eyes and huge head had been the object of neighborhood taunts for years.[24]

In electing Pluck, the men of the 84th followed a familiar pattern of social inversion for symbolic purposes. Ritual elevation of the deformed and deficient, common in European folklore, was found in the Feast of Fools of medieval England and the Abbey of Boys of early modern France.[25] Another more recent precedent suggested the mock election. At Garrat, near London, in the late eighteenth century an election spectacle drew both city gentry and rural people to see the investiture of a dwarf or hunchback as mayor, amid a week of festive license. During the political repression of the late eighteenth century, the Garrat election found its way into the literature of the London stage as part of a radical and comic critique of Parliamentary politics and personalities. The implication that the raucous Garrat election was more valid than the serious and corrupt system of representation, in which every principal of law could be violated with impunity, connected neatly with radical, democratic sentiments.[26] Even the phrase "a Garrat election" moved into popular speech and glossed a travesty of fair play and established procedure. More broadly, the Garrat election stood as a muffled but unmistakable denunciation of a political system determined to trample the natural rights of ordinary men.[27]

[23] *Democratic Press* (Philadelphia) May 9, 1825

[24] *Ibid.*, and *Saturday Evening Post*, May 15, 1825

[25] Natalie Z. Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1975), 97-123, Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 178-204, Roger D Abrahams and Richard Bauman, "Ranges of Festival Behavior," in Barbara A Babcock, ed , *The Reversible World Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society* (Ithaca, 1978), 193-208

[26] John Brewer, "Theatre and Counter-Theatre in Georgian Politics The Mock Election at Garrat," *Radical History Review* 22 (Winter 1879-80), 7-40, cf Thomas W. Lacquer, "The Queen Caroline Affair as Art in the Reign of George IV," *Journal of Modern History*, 54 (1982), 417-66.

[27] Francis Grose, *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (London, 1796), 161.

The 84th had invented a novel variation on the Garrat election theme, one with specific local meanings and effects. Pluck was chosen not for a day of reversed role-playing, but legally, to hold office for several years. His electors accurately aimed to make their point through inconvenience and embarassment, as well as through laughter. The 84th pushed the militia burlesque beyond mock elections. To the division officers' chagrin, Pluck's duties included leading his troops through the city streets to muster at the Bush Hill parade ground. As officers could be criticized through the election, so battalion drills, "those vexatious parades," would be lampooned by a comic procession.[28]

The *Post* gives us a description of an addled Pluck and his cheering supporters at the spectacle:

> On Wednesday last [May 18] was enacted the Grand Military farce, in which the redoubtable John Pluck made his debut in the character of colonel of the Merry 84th. The sport was not so great as was anticipated by the lovers of frolic and fun, and from the complete indifference with which the Colonel went through his part, apparently unconscious of everything around him, staring with stupid indifference and scarce possessing the spirit to answer occasional questions . . . which, the more plausibly to carry on the joke were put to him by his officers. It is said he once mustered sufficient Pluck to say 'he did not know where they were going to march him but would tell them all about it when he got back, if he could remember the way. . . .' which was much applauded as a brave speech by his friends and clamorously encored by the great crowd which had gathered around his quarters.[29]

In the parade, the 84th used two strategies for attacking the militia law. The men simultaneously parodied public battalion days and the uniforms of the officers. The Colonel made an outrageous officer, mounted on a spavined white nag and be-hatted with a huge *chapeau-de-bras,* a shoulder-covering woman's bonnet, the bow knotted under his chin. His baggy burlap pants were cinched up with a belt and enormous buckle; spurs half a yard long with murderous rowels and a giant sword parodied ceremonial military dress and made Pluck appear still shorter. The *Post* likely exaggerated Pluck's incapacity; he probably got the joke. It was reported that on taking command he shouted out, "Well, at least I ain't afraid to fight, and that's more than most of

[28] *Saturday Evening Post,* May 15, 1825.
[29] *Saturday Evening Post,* May 21, 1825.

them can say!" The mock-muster was purposefully anti-orderly and topsy-turvy. With hurrahs, the regiment surged through the streets to Bush Hill,

> with the Colonel at their head but so encompassed by horsemen as to be out of sight of those on foot, who were only now and then favored with a glimpse of the little fellow's plume or his long rusty sword as it rose from its extreme length above his cap and served to show the zig-zag course he pursued. His regiment did not wear their uniforms but bore sticks and cornstalks . . . and huddled together in such ungovernable merry mood withall as baffles description, and was in reality 'confusion worse confounded.'[30]

The parade ground soon exhibited "as motley a collection of figures and as grotesque" as reporters could recall, yet the scene was "more numerously and fashionably attended than any parade of that kind ever witnessed."[31] Militia men with cornstalks and brooms were a familiar sight to Philadelphians: poor men had to carry mock weapons at Muster Day because they rarely owned shoulder arms. But men who objected to militia duties elaborated on this disadvantage, parodying themselves.[32]

Pluck's fame spread quickly. "No one talks of anything else," wrote the *Democratic Press*.[33] A few days later, theater crowds were shouting for Pluck, and he was in demand at the circus. For weeks, editorials complained of the spectacle and decried its effects. Letter writers defended Pluck in the papers; poetasters composed odes to his bravery; amateur historians proposed biographies; collectors saved "Pluckiana"; and the lettered linked his name with Butler's Hudibras and Jonson's Bobadil. New York and Boston papers picked up Pluck's story, and, catching up the strains of popular antagonism to the militia system, the papers reprinted sarcastic descriptions of his activities, to the delight of their readers. The ostler had become a phenomenon in commercial

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] *United States Gazette* (Philadelphia), May 20, 1825.

[32] John F. Watson cited a "corn toppers" parade (the date is unclear): *The Annals of Philadelphia in the Olden Time* (Philadelphia, 1830; revised edition by Willis P. Hazard, Philadelphia, 1900) III, 363-364.

[33] *Democratic Press*, May 26, 1825.

popular culture.[34]

The following spring Pluck led the "Bloody 84th" again, not only through the Liberties but around the city center and throughout the southern district of Southwark. He was joined by "fantastical corn toppers" and hailed by crowds of thousands. At the solicitation of New York newspaper editors, Colonel William Stone and Major Mordecai Noah, Pluck made a tour. At New York City, he was "introduced," "armed and equipped in most ludicrous manner." Drunk, he "exhibited himself in his hotel room for 12 1/2 cents to each visitor."[35]

A national sensation thanks to Stone and Noah, Pluck visited Albany, where he was "nominated for vice-president," turned Providence and Boston, where the police offered to arrest him as a vagabond, and moved on to Richmond, which made him the toast of the town.[36] By October, 1826, he was back in Philadelphia long enough for a court-martial to attempt to end the farce. Pluck was pronounced incapable of holding office for seven years and cashiered.[37]

The hilarity which met Pluck's meteoric rise and his subsequent and abrupt fall into obscurity might tempt us to dismiss him as an amusing oddity of popular culture. But Pluck's career deserves to be taken seriously; his contemporaries took the joke seriously, even while they laughed. Why else court-martial a poor, deficient laborer? Militia advocates argued that the burlesque exposed the militia system to contempt, but contempt had been long simmering and widely shared among workingmen. Pluck's parades and his transformation into an icon of popular culture concentrated this contempt, made a joke of it, and presented it publicly. The militia burlesque did not give the state a bad reputation; it made that reputation impossible to deny.

[34] Press reception of the burlesque varied with newspapers' militia allegiances The *Democratic Press,* for example, was hostile to Pluck and his comrades after an initial burst of enthusiasm. Its editor, John Binns, was an active militia volunteer The *United States Gazette* took a similar position, calling for an end to the spectacles The *Post* was generally sympathetic. Unfortunately, no labor or workingmen's paper is available for these years in Philadelphia, which limits our ability to understand Pluck's local reception *United States Gazette,* June 1, 1825, *Democratic Press,* May 19, and May 24, 1825, *Democratic Press,* May 18, 1826.

[35] *Niles' Weekly Register,* August 12, 1826, 413, *United States Gazette,* May 11, 1826, *United States Gazette* May 13, 1826, *Democratic Press,* May 13, 1826, and *Democratic* Press, May 17, 1826.

[36] *Niles' Weekly Register,* August 12, 1826, 413, and September 16, 1826, 48, *Saturday Evening Post,* September 9, 1826 and September 23, 1826.

[37] *Niles' Weekly Register,* October 28, 1826. The rest of John Pluck's career was truly obscure. A pauper, he was in and out of Blockley almshouse for the rest of his life. He died in Blockley, apparently without family, and was buried in the poorhouse ground in 1839 *United States Gazette,* September 26, 1839.

The press revealed and responded to the offense taken by military leaders. Outraged correspondents declared that Pluck had shamed the entire state, the system had sustained "a death blow." Some officers suggested that the legislature make it a misdemeanor in office for a person to parade in a borrowed uniform.[38] Still others thought that "something should be done to prevent the recurrence of such disgusting scenes." Irreverence for military authority attracted "many of the depraved part of the crowd," "we saw everywhere surrounding us something filthy or debasing," reported the *Democratic Press*.[39]

For others, Pluck's election and parades were "a declaration of public opinion" about the way the militia law operated. As the *Saturday Evening Post* wrote of his election, "the friends of free suffrage and republican simplicity have eminent cause for congratulation. . . . And as to throwing up the commissions of the militia and the reputation of the state, why, who cares?"[40] A working-class public had made Pluck its symbol of thickheadedness in high places.

But corruption, more than ignorance, characterized Pennsylvania's office holders, the burlesque stood for "the recent election of the most illiterate and unfit candidates" and "the disrepute into which the system has sunk."[41] One "Colonel Washington" wrote

> it is the disgust with which I have seen so many of our offices filled by ignorance and imbecility that induces me to intrude Why should Pluck be the butt of aspersion when he is only the latest of a long list? The question has long since ceased to be whether the candidate for an epaullette is acquainted with the duty to which he aspires, and the man who would propose such an enquiry on the election ground in Pennsylvania would be looked upon as a mere novice

In fact, "Washington" alleged, the burlesque's message applied to political realms beyond the militia Corruption had seeped into every state office.

> Those gentlemen who are so tender of the reputation of our state [might] open their eyes a little wider [They] may open a much more important field of inquiry about our civil department may commence at the very head and also through every tranch [T]heir investigation

[38] *United States Gazette*, June 1, 1825
[39] *Democratic Press*, May 19, 1825
[40] *Saturday Evening Post*, May 7, 1825
[41] *United States Gazette*, June 1, 1825

> will afford them numerous and much more interesting opportunities to complain that merit and qualification are not guarantees of office in Pennsylvania. . . . [S]ome of their objects would not be able to defend themselves as well as John Pluck who called himself an 'honest man'[42]

Pluck's burlesque drew knowing nods as well as laughter. Using inversion, the elevation of the low and the investiture of responsibility in one who seemed an idiot, the mock militia men pointed the accusation of stupidity, self-interest, and dishonesty at public officials.

Pluck's popularity, accomplished through street performance, media accounts, and his tour, rested on widespread antagonism to the militia system and laws, an antagonism which sprang from the city's class divisions. Workingmen clearly had reasons to resent the law and disdain the officers—their hostility toward the unequal burden and the rise of "distinction" gave the joke its bite and force. Yet some among the educated, the propertied, and respectable saw the burlesque's humor, but saw it for different reasons and from a different point of view. For Philadelphians who felt uneasy about Jacksonian social and political change, especially the broadening of political activity and electoral participation, the elevation of a booby could symbolize all they feared from democracy. If militia troops functioned as proto-parties for artisans and mechanics as well as for elites, which we might suspect they did, Pluck's election could be read as labelling the leaders of ordinary men illegitimate and unqualified. Indeed, this was a thrust of "Washington's" letter. The Colonel and his crew might have let militia advocates and reformers laugh at the martial performance of the poorly clothed public companies. The men least able to laugh were the high division officers, charged by law with maintaining the unwieldy, unpopular system.

Evidently Philadelphia's drama was cycled through commercial culture, popularized by Pluck's grand tour, to be taken up in the countryside and in other cities. Opposition to the militia system persisted through the 1820s, 1830s and 1840s, ending only with the abolition of public musters in 1858. The burlesques helped keep opposition alive and visible. Corntoppers became familiar at annual battalion drills in rural Pennsylvania, New York, and New England. In the spring of 1829, men at Pennsylvania training days substituted canes and cornstalks for muskets, prompting an editor to observe that "ordinary musterings are absurd," for "they only give a parcel of silly

[42] *Ibid.*

ones high titles" and "a little brief authority and a chance to strut their hour in regimentals."[43]

Albany, New York, and then New York City witnessed large fantastical processions in 1831 and again in 1833. In Albany, "fusileers" and "invincibles" protested the state law dressed in wild costumes, women's curls, and enormous whiskers. One newspaper took up the theme typographically, printing its account of the "Grand Fantastical Procession" in jumbled, mismatched typeface. In New York City, the Grand Processions were recorded in etchings, press reports, and Mayor Philips Hone's private diary.[44]

In Philadelphia as the Workingmen's Party and then the Democratic Party took up the cause of militia reform, burlesquers continued their performances.[45] In May, 1833, the men of the Northern Liberties revitalized the memory of Pluck. One Colonel Peter Albright, a young man active in the Democratic Party, allowed his company of the 84th to appear in "fantastical dress," calling themselves the "Hollow Guards." Albright's men marched.

> to the music of a penny whistle . . . in no uniformity of uniform. . . . [Each] had endeavored to exceed the other in grotesqueness, and every variety of apparel and decoration was brought into this requisition. . . . The orderly sergeant bore on his right hand a wooden staff shaped like a sword on which was painted "defender of the laws". . . . The adjutant was . . . most ludicrously decorated with ribbons and patches of red flannel; his cap measured at least five feet in circumference. The standard

[43] *Niles' Weekly Register,* June 27, 1829, 284.

[44] *Workingman's Advocate* (New York) May 4, 1831 and October 5, 7, 14, 21, 26 and 29, 1831, for New England, Anthony J. Marro, "Vermont's Local Militia Units, 1815-1860," *Vermont History* 40 (1972), 28-42, Telfer Mook, "Training Day in New England," *New England Quarterly* 11 (1938), 675-97, Charles W. Burpee, *The Military History of Waterbury, New Hampshire* (Connecticut, 1891), 31, *Marcus Cunliffe, Soldier and Civilian: The Martial Spirit in America, 1775-1865* (Boston, 1968), 190, Philip Hone, manuscript diary, New York Historical Society, New York.

One artist registered the parades' protest against illegitimate authority and illustrated the connections between transatlantic cultural experiences by using the pseudonym "Hassan Straightshanks." This was a direct reference to the popular cartoons of the Radical English artist, George Cruikshank. "The Grand Fantastical Procession of the City of New York," etching, collections of the New York Public Library.

[45] We have no social history of the militia reform campaigns in Philadelphia, but see Walter J. Hugins, *Jacksonian Democracy and the Working Class: A Study of the New York Workingmen's Movement, 1829-1837* (Stanford, 1960), 33, 138, Philip S. Foner, *History of the American Labor Movement, Volume I: From Colonial Times to the Founding of the American Federation of Labor,* revised edition, (New York, 1975), 123-24, 467-68, 473-74.

> bearer had one leg of his pantoloons red, the other white, and wore for covering an old fire bucket, with a painted rice fan for a cockade; on the seat of honor was lashed a knapsack with 'The Bloody 84th' painted upon it. . . . The banner he carried bore on one side—Life Guards of Pennsylvania Senators. On the other, a sketch of Senator Rodgers of Bucks County. . . . Some of the privates were in calico frocks and some in small clothes [knee breeches]. One carried a fish for a weapon, another an old broom . . . a fourth was embellished with the figure of a heart placed conspicuously on his back [as if for target practice].

After this detachment came another "still more singularly attired."

Albright addressed the troops "with martial words," and as the solemn column of men took up march, they were followed "promiscuously by ununiformed [sic] members with umbrellas, broomhandles and sticks." These trooped helter-skelter through all the principal streets, to the amusement of the downtown. "At every street corner they gained additional force," and the "thousands who followed entirely blocked up the streets."[46]

Again the press pointed to the explicitly political purposes of the enactment: "To all intents and purposes they looked as ridiculous as ridiculous could be and the object in view—that of establishing the folly and absurdity of our ordinary militia parades was most fully obtained." "Since the militia laws are clearly a farce, none should complain about this. . . . [T]herefore, let [the militia system] be ridiculed until those in authority either amend it or abolish it altogether."[47]

The militia officers, themselves experts at creating imagery through street ritual, did not appreciate being made the butt of public jokes. Rather than allow the farce to grow into a spectacle *a la* Pluck, they arrested Peter Albright and prepared to court-martial him "for permitting unsoldier-like conduct." Although some newspapers favored Albright as "a martyr in the cause of the picturesque,"[48] he and his company had trod on important toes. State Senator Rogers, whose portrait adorned the banner, was a militia general, editor of the *Doylestown Democrat*, and chair of the Legislature's committee on the militia. Albright's parade was a response to Rogers' committee's decision to reject a report recommending the abolition of public trainings and the restructuring of fines. The committee, the press claimed, re-

[46] *Pennsylvania Gazette* (Philadelphia), May 21, 1833.
[47] *Ibid.*
[48] *Pennsylvanian* (Philadelphia), September 17, 1833.

ported against the bill despite vigorous efforts by city delegates and unanimous support in the House, because Rogers and his friends were unwilling to abolish their own titles and commands [49] As embarrassing as the display of the general's mug in a tatterdemalion street parade, the burlesque preceded an election for Brigadier General by only a few weeks Resurrecting the memory of Pluck and drawing on all the strains of antagonistic laughter aimed at the pretensions of officers and uniformed militia men, the Hollow Guards threatened the legitimacy of command at a crucial moment, the time of the transfer and confirmation of power

Far from dampening the Guards' enthusiasm, Albright's arrest spurred them on In the fall, they celebrated the Colonel's acquittal with still more theatrical and incongruous costumes—and now, music Again, they used anti-uniformity "no two dresses bore the least resemblance to each other " As before, they borrowed images and costumes from the popular theater, "knights clad in armor, a cavalier clad in a bearskin with an iron charm around his middle, Indians, clowns etc " Beards and paint hid faces, and exaggeration had free rein "Swords under the length of six feet in the blade were 'quite despiseable' Twelve feet was the regulation length of their muskets " In a jab at the serious ceremonialism of the volunteer militias, banners displayed random slogans like "Dinners baked here at the shortest notice " Banners also reminded the audience of the problem of office, merit and authority, making use of such slogans as "Honor to whom honor is due "[50]

The burlesques continued, celebrating the Guard's moral victory and opposing Albright's persecution Each "exceeded in splendor all former exhibitions," and featured "three to five hundred men," "fully accoutred "[51] In late October, Albright appeared as a Revolutionary soldier In a powdered wig, his face floured white and his nose generously smeared with "Spanish Brown" shoe polish, he bowed graciously to the crowd By his Revolutionary garb, gentleman's wig and a brown bedaubed nose, Albright showed he had lost none of his nerve His costume pointed to the disgrace brought on militia system by the inequality of burdens and the machinations of self-interested leaders the makeup literally called the officers a lot of "brown noses " Personal

[49] *Pennsylvanian Gazette*, May 22 and May 28 1833
[50] *Pennsylvanian*, October 29, 1833
[51] *Ibid*

and political antagonism also blended as an effigy of William Hurlick, the city's despised fines collector, swung from a pole.[52]

The anti-militia protests continued in Pennsylvania and New England. In New Haven an "awful battalion" formed under the command of "Timothy Tremendous," to "shame all scarecrows." Their standard showed "a bull rampant," with a Revolutionary veteran "in reverse order [seated backwards] on his back and holding on by the tail," surmounted by the punning motto, "The Bull-Work of Our Country." "Music was by callithumpian masters," a band wreaking havoc with broken pots and pans: "the very cats were dumfounded by it." A working-class ward in Easton, Pennsylvania, celebrated Jackson Day, 1834, with the election of a Pluck-like "Redoubtable Colonel Scheffler" and planned processions for training days. At Chambersburg, the *Repository* recorded a vast mock battalion in June, 1835, with young men in blackface and patched and scavenged clothes. Wild weapons, rough music and deformed horses were highlights of the parade. "So much for the useless militia system, which excites such indignation," and so much for training days, worse than useless "when men are trained for no other purpose than to make them weary."[53] These were only nearby variations on the mock militias: records of similar burlesque parades can be found from Maine to Georgia, and for later dates in the Midwest.[54]

In Philadelphia, burlesquers harrassed militia officers for at least another decade. Colonel Thomas Duffield, long a commander in the Spring Garden district, addressed a volunteer militia convention in Harrisburg in 1842 "with a view to bringing to the notice of the officers present the extraordinary difficulties which they had to encounter in some portions of the county of Philadelphia in attempting to carry out the militia law. . . . [T]here were a large number of persons there opposed to military trainings, and they took every means in their power to bring the military into disrepute and cast ridicule upon them. . . . [They] appeared on parade grounds, dressed in fantastical dresses, and

[52] *Ibid*

[53] *New Haven Standard*, quoted in *Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 6, 1833, *Easton Sentinel*, January 10, 1834, Ethan Allen Weaver, *Local Historical and Biographical Sketches* (Germantown, 1906), 90-91, *Niles' Weekly Register*, June 6, 1835, 234, (quoting the *Chambersburg Repository)*

[54] Augustus B Longstreet, *Georgia Scenes* (New York, 1840), 145, Cunliffe, *Soldier and Civilian*, 190-192, Theodore Gromert, "The First National Pastime in the Middle West," *Indiana Magazine of History* 29 (1933) 171-75, and Richard Walser, "Don Quixote Invincibles," *North Carolina Folklore* 24 (1976), 95-100

when officers attempted to make them do their duty, they raised riots and mobs." Duffield reported that resistance spread beyond the parade ground. "When they attempted to collect fines from these persons, they would permit their property to be sold for fines and then bring suits against the officers. . . ."[55]

The political use of disguise and burlesque generally and fantastical militias in particular did not originate in Philadelphia; the notion of comic costumed street processions was borrowed from the charivari or rough music. Violet Alford and Edward P. Thompson have documented and analyzed the uses of rough music or "skimmington riding" in nineteenth-century England; Bryan Palmer has traced the survival and transformation of this method of folk justice in Canada and the United States.[56] The Philadelphia (and Chambersburg, Easton, New York, Albany and New Haven) mock militia parades shared much with European and American charivaris. The use of pots, pans, chamber pots and household utensils as musical instruments; the elements of inversion, such as backwards seating on an ass, horse, goat or bull were typical devices of rough musics. Singling out and mocking a transgressor, whether officers, a Senator, or the fines collector—preserved the core of folk justice.

The charivari's older use was tied to the control of sexual mores and excess: newlyweds; partners in marriages deemed unnatural because of age disparity or the too-recent death of a spouse; adulterers; wife-beaters; husband-beaters; or others who overstepped the usual bounds of relations between the sexes and generations became targets of mocking, sometimes violent processions. Palmer and Thompson argue that the charivari found its way into social criticism in the nineteenth century. In England, the skimmington became a community weapon against speculating landlords and other disrupters of older economic relations. Palmer cites an early nineteenth-century American "shivaree" aimed at a wedding celebration, not to tease the bride and groom, but to upbraid the family for using the party to distinguish themselves from their neighbors. The rough musicians directed their scorn at

[55] *Military Magazine and Record of the Volunteers of the City and County of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia) 3 (1842), 11.

[56] Alford, "Rough Music"; Thompson, "'Rough Music' *Le Charivari Anglais*", Bryan D. Palmer, "Discordant Music. Charivaris and White Capping in Nineteenth-Century America," *Labour/La Travailleur* (Halifax) 3 (September 1973), 5-62.

"d—d aristocratical and powerful grand big-bug doins."[57] Political uses of the charivari were thus local, aimed at known violators of social relations which, while not egalitarian, were seen as protected by the shared mores and expectations Thompson has called "moral economy."[58] Contempt for new sources of law and order or hostility to legal and political transformation also found expression in Canadian rough musics: charivari-ists violently protested the Confederation of Canada in the 1830s.[59] There was also an earlier and continuing North American precedent; in the New York State Helderberg region, tenants opposing their landlords' encroachments used calico dresses and tin-horned masks in their nighttime raids.[60]

Links between political protest and the charivari are also found in etymological evidence. In Pennsylvania, both charivari musicians and the bands accompanying mock-militias called themselves "callithumpians." This obscure dialect word was used in the west of England to designate Jacobins, radical reformers, and "disturbers of order at Parliamentary elections."[61]

Although the connections are difficult to prove conclusively, other sources of the tradition seem to exist in the costumes and dramas of the Luddites, the secret society called the Scotch Cattle, and the Rebecca rioters in the British Isles. These protests by agricultural and rural industrial laborers relied on secret organization, disguised night-time raids, anonymous threats, and the destruction of offending machines or of obstacles (turnpike gates in the case of the Rebecca riots, knitting frames in the case of the Luddites). Norman Simms argues that the use of folk dramatic techniques—disguises, secret cries, and mythical leaders—is evidence that the Luddites and their like saw themselves as

[57] Thompson, "'Rough Music'", Palmer, "Discordant Music," 24

[58] E P Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 50 (1971), 76-136, Edward Countryman, "Northern Land Rioters in the Eighteenth Century "

[59] Palmer, "Discordant Music," 26-33, cf George M Story, "Mummers in Newfoundland History A Survey of the Printed Record," in Herbert Halpert and G M Story, eds , *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland Essays in Anthropology, Folklore and History* (Toronto, 1969), 35-61

[60] Henry Christman, *Tin Horns and Calico* (New York, 1945), David Maldwyn Ellis, *Landlords and Farmers in the Hudson-Mohawk Region, 1790-1850* (Ithaca, 1946), 225-67 Disguised rent rioters were known in the Helderberg region from at least the 1790's, according to Ellis, 242

[61] Hans Kurath, *A Word Geography of the Eastern United States* (Ann Arbor, 1949), 78, Joseph Wright, *The English Dialect Dictionary*, (London, 1898) II, 543

defenders of community, the same community created by less antagonistic dramas, such as Christmas maskings.[62] Certainly Philadelphians heard, whether through the press or by word of mouth from recent immigrants, of the panic the Luddites caused in the English government and the complicity and the support that people in textile districts gave the machine breakers.

* * * *

Mock militias took a familiar form of folk justice and altered it to fit their specific local purposes. That cornstalk militia parades diffused and persisted shows that the issue they addressed was prevalent beyond Philadelphia. The popularity of the burlesques reveals the ease with which older British and European folk dramas could still express dissent, even in the very different, much less repressive political climate of the United States. The charivari had been used to regulate conduct among neighbors or to attack persons who threatened community norms. In the case of the fantastical militias, offenders were known, sometimes personally known to protestors, and their transgression affected the economic well-being of mechanics and artisans and offended their notions about social relations.

Pluck's burlesques and the workingmen's charivaris pushed folk dramatic protest beyond the immediate issue of the odious company drills. The militia system stood for a larger problem of social relations, which workingmen called "distinction." In the drills and conduct of officers, workingmen saw power—symbolized in titles and rank—exaggerated by an unrepublican fondness for prestige and self-differentiation. Distinction itself was becoming the basis for power and social authority. The private volunteer companies, which only the most prosperous master artisans could afford to join, were dominated by lawyers, bankers, merchants, and "gentlemen." The volunteers provided the militia system with most of its field and division officers. In turn, militia title and rank were concomitants of government officeholding and acknowledged as necessary for entrance into bourgeois "good society." As the burlesquers pointed out, uniform, office, and title were hollow proofs of merit in a frankly unequal system.

[62] Simms, "Ned Ludd's Mummers Play", cf. David Jones, *Before Rebecca* (London, 1973)

In militia elections and commands, workingmen located a means by which businessmen and professionals improved their social image and tried to foist "aristocracy" on ordinary citizens. While these petty tyrants climbed over social equals, they went out of their way to deny their common origins. Military jokes abounded in newspapers and comic periodicals, pointing to the effects of "military pride." "A farmer who was elected to a corporalship in a militia company, his wife after discoursing with him for some time on the advantage which his family would derive from his exaltation, inquired in a doubting tone, 'Husband, will it be proper for us to let our children play with the neighbor's now [?]'"[63] Other slurs compared militia officers with drunken Negroes and concluded that the latter were the more honorable sort of human being.[64] These insults were of a piece with Peter Albright's brown-smeared nose, pointing to the character, motivations, and morals of the officers as corrupt and self-serving.

The same attitude toward officership and the construction of social authority through appearance underlay the use of fantastical disguises and costumes. The term "fantastical" bore a derogatory implication: it meant anyone in burlesque dress, but "more in rags than ribbands."[65] Like the harlequin, whose diamond patterned suit was an abstraction of the beggar's rags and patches, and like the English Christmas mummer dressed in straw, rags, or paper, the fantastical may have been raggedy as much in imitation of the rural poor as because of his own origins.[66] American fantasticals imitating militia troops drew on this double-edged mockery. Appearing in wild anti-uniformity, they at once made fun of the militia's stress on elaborate and uniform dress, brought the officers into contempt with the crazy parodies of their costumes, and laughed at their own public company's lack of style and prestige. Anti-uniformity was carried to the extreme, in vari-colored pants legs, oddly formed hats, and mismatched shoes. Over and over reporters noticed that no two performers looked in any way the same. Similarly,

[63] *Mechanic's Free Press*, September 20, 1828.

[64] *Philadelphia Comic Almanac for 1835* (Philadelphia, 1835) n.p. This almanac contains a small woodcut of Colonel Pluck.

[65] Grose, *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, 140.

[66] Thelma Niklaus, *Harlequin; or, the Rise of the Bergamask Rogue* (New York, 1956), 22-34, Simon Lichman, "The Gardener's Story and What Came Next A Contextual Analysis of the Marshfield Paper Boys' Mumming Play," Ph.D. dissertation, (University of Pennsylvania, 1981), 254-63.

the officers' and volunteers' love of equipment was lampooned by carrying dead fish or deer legs instead of guns, using rusty culverts for field pieces and impossibly large swords and bayonets. Pride could be undercut with broken down horses and random banners—references to the volunteers' satins and fine animals. Another edge of the same laughing mockery was blackface, which injected the raucous laughter of the popular theater into military burlesque.

Commentary on the mock militias affirmed a generalized hostility to pretension and self-aggrandizement, but critics also drew parallels to concrete and immediate problems in social relations. The most important of these was the hostility between mechanics, craftsmen, and employers which resulted from the crumbling of older crafts and trades.[67] New work routines, the devaluation of skill, the disintegration of apprenticeship, gross exploitation of factory, sweatshop, and outworkers—all features of the transformation of the urban economy —caused men to focus the misery caused by these changes into personal antagonism against masters and employers. Feelings quite similar to those expressed about "military pride" found their way into descriptions of the employers' social style as well as their economic practices. The *Mechanic's Free Press* relentlessly jabbed at the growing tendency to judge men by external attributes, yet angrily acknowledged that in the modern world, money made the man. The *Press* saw the use of carriages, fine clothes and titles and the elegance and exclusivity in social events as tools in the construction of inequality.

Radical artisans argued that "The many opportunities that gave men the means and ready access to fortune . . . have pushed men into good society who positively disgrace bad. . . . (S)uch men . . . are now dictating monarchical principles to us . . . and little kingly notions have crept into our institutions." Part of this project was the creation of "visible lines of distinction."[68]

New inequalities arose from economic practices, but social style was being used to legitimate distinctions. "We have men in power," wrote "Peter Single," "who originally were without character and of course without friends. . . . [T]hey succeeded by nefarious means in amassing

[67] Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850* (Philadelphia, 1980), 5-6, 77-8, Richard A. McLeod, "Philadelphia Artisans, 1828-1850," Ph.D. diss. (University of Missouri, 1971), 59-74, Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York, 1984), 107-42.

[68] *Mechanic's Free Press*, September 6, 1828.

a small sum, by speculating in human misery, grinding down some poor illiterate being . . . and now ride in their carriage, give balls and act the rich nabob." Single specified men who rose to the status of master artisans and then denied responsibility to their fellows. "When they drain all they can from his labor [they] despise [the working man] as much as they do the reptile which crawls upon the ground. . . ."[69]

For critics like Single and the men of the 84th, militia musters and the militia system could be seen as part of this process of exploitation and legitimation. The *Mechanic's Free Press* described musters as "worse than useless military show," because they forced men to "submit to the degradation of being an instrument for transforming men into peacocks."[70] That is, they provided yet another occasion for men who thought they were better than workingmen to "accumulate popularity" by dressing up, mounting a horse, and ordering a regiment around. The tone of artisan criticism of the militia system shows that many workingmen viewed regimental officers and employers as the same kind of accumulating person, if in fact they were not literally the same person.

The mock election and burlesque militia parades combined general social criticism, specific political protest, and personal satire of known individuals. Their flexibility in accomplishing all these tasks at once, and in accommodating a variety of understandings of social relations testifies to the vibrancy of folk dramatic traditions in the early nineteenth century. That militia burlesques provoked complaint, denunciation, and courts martial shows that they hit their mark, and that mockery could not be shrugged off easily. For Philadelphia's workingmen, older folk traditions could become powerful, public means to attack the legitimacy of distinction, authority, and inequity.

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[69] *Mechanic's Free Press,* April 19, 1828, see also *Mechanic's Free Press,* October 18, 1828.
[70] *Mechanic's Free Press,* January 9, 1830